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What a Feeling! Motivating EFL Students through Collaborative Writing with Poems

Collaborative writing presents not only a highly motivating learning experience for EFL/ESL students but also a creative pedagogical tool for teachers. This type of activity can yield multiple positive results, including peer cooperation and increased motivation. When students work together on a writing assignment, they learn from each other and edit each other's mistakes. At the same time, the change in the routine from writing assignments individually to writing as a group can be very motivating for students who dislike writing in the first place. Furthermore, collaborative writing can be achieved using relatively simple techniques like the activity described in this article.

First of all, what is collaborative writing? In essence, it means that the student teams up with one or more peers to go through the writing process of brainstorming, organizing, outlining, editing drafts, and agreeing on the final product. It sounds simple, but it requires careful planning to promote effective interpersonal communication, a key aspect in successful group work. In my country, the idea of collaborative writing is somewhat foreign to most students, so this different way of writing requires some initial training and practice. However, my Freshman Composition students at a U.S. university's branch campus in Panama, a group composed of a mixture of native and near-native speakers of English, were quick to adopt and benefit from the activity.

It has also been interesting to see how collaboration brings personal satisfaction and boosts self-confidence for those students who feel a little overwhelmed by their writing tasks. Giving students the opportunity to be creative, through activities such as revising a story or changing its ending, can be a lot of fun, especially with students who have vivid imaginations. Motivation and enthusiasm also increase when students expe-

rience having their individual contributions and ideas accepted by the group and incorporated in the written product.

Ede (2001) points out that student writers are likely to continue to use collaborative writing outside the classroom in their future jobs. Many professionals, such as engineers, chemists, or psychologists, to mention a few, often write collaboratively, especially for projects that require teamwork and group analysis. Students should be aware of this real life practice of collaborative writing so they will not see this classroom activity as merely "school work" but rather as something they will apply in their future careers.

To effectively implement collaborative writing in the classroom, we must first consider the students' concerns about writing. L1 and L2 writers often face the same difficulties and doubts when trying to compose a piece. Therefore, we should provide our students with ample opportunity to interact in groups, to share their ideas and concerns, and to help each other deal with specific problems such as outlining, essay patterns, word choice, or syntax. Having this network of fellow writers with similar problems and concerns can create a more stress-free environment and thereby make any composition task less frustrating and more enjoyable. While writing collaboratively, student writers will see their own written work as reading material for an intended audience. Raimes (1984) emphasized the importance of audience as a means of giving a sense of purpose to the task, so in expanding the audience from teacher to peers, the writing task becomes more purposeful and meaningful.

Writing as an isolated activity, as has been the procedure in the traditional classroom, provides limited and delayed feedback to the writer. Widdowson (1984) points out that the writer in this case has to be both the initiator and the recipient of the discourse and consequently does not receive the necessary feedback and support. Collaborative writing, on the other hand, provides feedback and support right away, and the writer can know if the intended meaning is actually being communicated to the reader.

Keeping this in mind, I am always looking for good teaching techniques to stimulate creativity, motivation, and collaboration in my composition class. One of these techniques came from a workshop called "Tips for Teaching a Text" at the 2004 Panama-TESOL Summer Seminar. The presenter demonstrated some useful techniques that integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities based on various motivating texts such as fables, songs, and poems. He emphasized the importance of choosing texts appropriate for the age, level, and interests of the students. The workshop participants had so much fun working with a poem about feelings that I decided to try a similar exercise with my university students. They also very much enjoyed the activity and produced some extraordinary writing samples (see the Appendix).

I decided to work with the poetry genre for the collaborative writing for a number of reasons. First, poetry works as a medium to spark emotions when used in recitation and literary analysis. Second, the poem is a relatively short form, as opposed to most prose forms, and a very effective one for a single class-hour exercise such as the one described in this article. Third, poetry allows students to free their emotions creatively. For these reasons, the work with this particular genre has been very successful with my composition class.

Group activity

I asked my class to get together in small groups. Then, on the board we did some clustering of ideas on the topic of anger. I asked them to recall how they expressed their anger when they were little children. There was a wide range of responses, from some very serious ones to some more humorous ones such as, "I used to take off my clothes when I felt angry." These ideas and comments created a pleasant atmosphere in which to begin working together.

Next I handed out copies of a poem about feelings that was written by an 8-year-old girl and asked the class to read it silently. After reading the poem, we looked at the little girl's illustration that accompanied the poem and imagined just how angry she must have been. Together we discussed the words used in the poem and analyzed the author's personality and the motives for her anger.

After this discussion about the original text, I asked the class to change the first line of the poem from "I was angry and mad" to "I was happy and glad" and to write a new version of

the poem. The groups worked enthusiastically, sharing many ideas with which to create a new poem. The result was both inspiring and highly motivating. Each group read their versions of the poem, generating a lot of lively participation from the rest of the class. The students were very surprised by the diversity of interpretations rendered on the idea of being "happy and glad," with some humorous and others more serious. Sharing the poems created a positive learning atmosphere that produced some truly amazing work.

Watson-Reekie (1984, 103) suggested that models (such as a sample poem) "should be introduced and utilized in the writing lesson in such a way as to allow for collaborative activity, both oral and written, for both prewriting discussion and post-writing critique, for both analysis of the model and evaluation of the students' production." In our class, the prewriting activity, the clustering activity in which students related the topic to personal experience, enhanced the written product with creative, humorous, and beautifully poetic content.

While the activity discussed in this article was based on poetry, collaborative writing can be used with other genres as well. If time permits, students can also be encouraged to collaborate in the writing of essays and research papers, genres that are closer to their academic lives. While the teacher loses the tight creative packages that poems offer, she helps students gain experience in writing for other university classes. Furthermore, with the lengthier process associated with such genres, the individual tasks may be even more clearly defined, particularly with research responsibilities. As students become used to collaborative assignments, the possibilities for cooperative learning become endless.

The benefits of collaborative writing activities in language teaching are numerous. First, collaboration promotes individual participation, increases self-confidence, and encourages productivity—all of which are realistic and worthwhile goals for the teacher. It is often more difficult to accomplish these goals when students are working individually, especially with large classes and shy students. Second, teamwork enables students to learn from each other and stimulate each other's sense of creativity. Third, the activity can be fun, which should always be a goal of instruction. By sharing and working together, students will find that writing can be an enjoyable activity that allows them to express their ideas, even in poems, as they never thought they could. Now that's a good feeling!

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APPENDIX | FSU-PANAMA FRESHMAN COMPOSITION STUDENT POEMS

What a Feeling: Motivating EFL Students through Collaborative Writing… • *Amarilis Montero*

Feelings

I was happy and glad
And it seemed that there were lilies inside me.
And as I got happier and happier,
The lilies spread and grew for others to see.
I was so happy I could feel the roots dangling
down my toes.
Then I began to see colours.
I saw the rainbow reflected in my leaves.
Suddenly, there was peace.
I was so happy it weakened my knees.
The wind threw me to the trees.
Hey! There goes my leaf.
As the other leaves saw freedom, they flew
to find their leaf-mates.
I felt my body burst and suddenly I became one
with the land.

by: Emanuel Romero, Keren Bachar,
and Rita De la Guardia

Feelings

I was happy, full of joy
and it seemed I was in a roller coaster ride,
and as I went higher and higher
my smile grew wider and wider.

I felt my feelings were going to collide.
Then I began to see balloons,
confetti and streamers of all colors.
As I went higher and higher
my ears began to ring cheerful melodies.

I felt like singing inside.
It was magical,
I didn't want it to stop,
this fuzzy feeling inside.
Nobody could stop me,
or retain me if they could.

The happiness grew on inside.
Then suddenly it stopped, and it was gone
as on ground I had arrived.

by: Juan F. Mantovani, Carolina Muñoz,
Mariella Gaffrey, Leila Nilipour

Feelings

I was happy and glad,
And it seemed that I could jump and touch the sky.
And as I got happier and happier,
I felt closer to the stars.

Such happiness I could not hide.
You could only tell by the shine of my eyes.
This feeling was all mine.
It was my treasure—my poetry line.

But such happiness I could not hide.
It was so great; it didn't fit.
I just could not hold it inside.

Then I decided to do it.
I was going to go get my star.
And with the constellations in sight
I jumped high to the sky.

Suddenly I fell off my bed.
I woke up; it was only a dream.
But I was still happy,
Even though I didn't get my star.

I had a dream that made me happy.
It made me remember.
Somebody once taught me
That no star was out of reach
Even in real life.

It was my dream,
Something I had created in my mind.
So it was my happiness,
A feeling all mine.

by: Madelaine de la Ossa, Eduardo Rodriguez,
Michael Hamoui, and Daniella Tribaldos

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Nonstop Writing
An Ungraded Classroom Activity

In my experience teaching across the globe, I have found that the need for new teaching approaches is greatest in the area of student writing. Students everywhere seem to find writing a daunting task. They frequently complain that as soon as they pick up their pencils, their minds go blank. All too often we see panic set in among students who believe that their teacher is going to mark them down for every "i" they don't dot, every "t" they don't cross, and every error they might make in spelling, structure, or vocabulary.

The fact is, many would-be writers feel defeated before they even begin writing and are paralyzed by their feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Techniques such as graphic organizers can help students overcome their anxiety about writing, particularly at the initial stage when students are groping for ways to get started on their assignment. But the technique I have found most rewarding for students and teachers alike in fighting writer's block is Nonstop Writing.

Nonstop Writing is exactly what the term implies. The students do in-class, non-graded, timed writing on an assigned topic—without stopping. In my workshops across the world, the first questions I hear from my host-country counterparts are: "Why do a writing exercise that is not to be graded? How do you expect students to learn from their mistakes?" My response is always the same: "There is a place for graded writing exercises, but this particular ungraded exercise is valuable because it enables students to communicate their thoughts without fear of judgment of any kind. When students are allowed to write freely without fear of evaluation, we convey to them that their *message* has value."

To give the teachers in my workshops the experience of Nonstop Writing as an organizational and tension-reducing tool, I provide them with a brief reading on the gradual extinction of languages that is occurring across the world. Before doing the reading, however, the teachers are asked to guess how many languages exist in the world. We discuss whether or not it is important to individual societies and the world at large to maintain less-spoken languages. Time is then allowed for reading the passage.

When the reading activity is finished, the teachers are given the steps for the writing exercise and I put the following statement on the board: "All the world's languages should be reduced to four." (To spur debate, the statement could later be revised to say, "All languages should be maintained.") I stipulate that even though they may disagree with the statement, they must use the "think three" rule, which requires them to support my statement with at least three reasons, all explained in narrative form. At this point, someone usually asks: "What if I can't think of anything to say?" I respond by saying: "Then write *I can't think of anything to say, I can't think of anything to say,* until your thoughts start flowing again." This usually gets a chuckle and reduces tension, which is one of the benefits of the exercise.

Nonstop Writing procedure

The following is the simple Nonstop Writing procedure used to help students organize their

writing and provide supporting evidence for their assertions:

- The topic is written on the chalkboard.
- Students have one minute of "think" time (pencils on the desk), to organize their thoughts.
- The teacher says, "You may begin, now" and notes the time.
- Students begin writing and must continue writing for exactly five minutes, no more, no less.
- The teacher says: "Time. Please put down your pencils."
- Students then have one minute to self-edit. If they have a spelling question, they may ask the teacher to write the word on the chalkboard.
- Students are asked to volunteer to read their compositions aloud.

Students who do not read aloud *may* hand in their compositions for the teacher to read, but not grade. The only thing the teacher does is write a brief, positive comment at the end of the paper so that the student will know that it has been read—something as simple as "Thanks for the effort," or "Interesting idea," or just a smiley-face will do. Commenting in this way should be done on all papers that students hand in because they are important contributors to the student's progress and sense of self-worth.

Uses for Nonstop Writing

In addition to helping reduce the paralyzing fear and anxiety felt by many students facing a new writing project, Nonstop Writing has other virtues. One is its flexibility; it can be used at any time and with virtually any subject. Because the students are assured that there are no right or wrong answers, the Nonstop Writing exercise encourages them to freely express their opinions on any topic. Moreover, the exercise can be used with content-based instruction as:

- a pre-reading activity by itself, or as a follow-through after the development of a web or other graphic organizer for writing purposes
- a mid-way activity to predict the outcome of an event
- a post-reading activity
- a written reaction to an event described in the reading
- a comment or letter addressed to a character in the reading
- an evaluation of the text

Students could also do a "write-back" associated with Nonstop Writing; that is, they could write a letter to the author of a reading or to some other person connected with the reading—past, present or future, real or fictional. In Russia, I have had students read the works of the poet Alexander Pushkin, after which they do a five-minute "write-back" to Pushkin about one of his works. They might, for example, write a personal letter to him discussing the impact of his literature on the student, the society in which the student lives, or the world at large. I have the students start their letter to Pushkin with, "Dear Sasha," (the nickname for Alexander). The students giggle at this familiarity and thus are put at ease. Nonstop Writing and "write-back" exercises also are valuable when used in conjunction with a real event in the students' lives because they enable the students to voice on paper what they might not feel comfortable saying out loud.

Another benefit of the nonstop five-minute writing exercises is that in areas where national examinations require students to write timed essays, the exercises give students practice writing "against the clock." After my teenage students in Cairo had taken their end-of-year examinations, I asked them about the essay portion of the exam. Several agreed that the timed writing portion of the test was the "easiest part of the exam."

Incorporating Nonstop Writing and the "think three" strategy once or twice a month takes very little time and results in increased willingness by students to produce written work; a strengthening of the organization, development, and fluency of their writing; and fewer writing errors.

I encourage teachers to give the Nonstop Writing exercise serious consideration. It can help reduce much of the tension and anxiety students feel at the beginning of a writing assignment, provide an organizational framework for writing, and present students with a nonjudgmental forum for their written expressions.

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English for Fools

Teaching a foreign language successfully does not depend only on one's knowledge from books on methodology. Of course, it would be good to be aware of methodology as much as possible, but unless a teacher is creative, he or she will not be able to give a class that extra spark that truly inspires learning. Add a sense of humor, and a tiresome learning process becomes something learners adore.

Students always wait for something new from their teachers, especially on a holiday or on the eve of a holiday.

I am one of the many teachers who enjoy working with idioms and proverbs that are related to the subject or theme of a lesson. It goes without saying that whatever additional materials we use, these materials ought to have a connection with the topic. April 1st, or *April Fools' Day,* when in Europe and America friends play tricks on each other, is one of the best-loved holidays. We teachers ought to take that into consideration. Here is an idea I exercised last year.

I began each of my lessons on April Fools' Day by saying: "Today I will give you some proverbs and sayings about fools." My students were delighted to hear this, as we always have fun with the foolishness of others. I wrote on the blackboard the following proverbs, taken from *The Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs.*

1. Fortune favours fools. [According to the widespread superstition, fools were both lucky themselves and bringers of luck to those they encountered.]
2. The folly of one man is the fortune of another.
3. Children and fools must not play with edged tools.
4. Too much money makes one mad.
5. Much learning makes men mad.
6. Fools grow without watering.
7. Little things please little minds. [First cited in approximately this form in Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845), although the thought can be traced back to Ovid (1st century BC).]
8. Once wood, never wise. [*Wood* here means *mad.*]
9. From a foolish judge, a quick sentence.
10. A wise man changes his mind, a fool never. [Some variants have "…but a fool perseveres."]
11. Fools are wise as long as silent.
12. For mad words deaf ears.
13. A fool may give a wise man counsel.
14. He that is born a fool is never cured.
15. A fool and his money are soon parted.
16. There is no fool like an old fool.
17. A barber learns to shave by shaving fools. [The implication is that only a fool allows himself to be practiced on by a learner.]
18. Fools set stools for wise folks to stumble at.
19. Every man is a fool sometimes, and none all the time.

Nineteen proverbs! One of the students asked me why I had given them 19 proverbs, not 20. I asked: "Do you really want me to make it 20?"

Unanimously a positive answer was given. I said: "Ok! Let's make it 20." And I wrote one more proverb on the reverse side of the blackboard because I had purposely filled the blackboard with the 19 proverbs so that there would not be space for Number 20.

We translated the 19 proverbs and tried to find their equivalents in Kazakh and Russian. We were really enjoying finding good equivalents and translating them. I had the students repeat the proverbs after me. They did very well. My students repeated them in English many times trying to learn them at once. Then one of them reminded me about the 20th proverb. Thanking him for reminding me, I turned the reversible board around. The students read the 20th proverb:

> *Wise men make proverbs and fools repeat them.*

The room roared with laughter! When the classroom calmed down, I asked the students if my joke had hurt their feelings. I also said the joke was glaring evidence of the 19th proverb. This is how I played a trick on my students in all three of my classes, and I had the same result each time.

Additional activities with proverbs

After the fun of the trick, there still remains enough time to demonstrate other activities to help bring these proverbs to life. Of course, there might be many methods of working on proverbs besides finding appropriate equivalents. One possibility that comes to mind is categorization, i.e., students could try to find themes that unite some of the proverbs. Two possible categories are *fool as a victim* and *fool as an instigator.*

Another possibility is looking at how each of the proverbs actually describes a fool, for example, according to the Penguin dictionary definition of *foolishness: foolish acts, characteristics of fools, the recklessness of fools, the gullibility of fools, the talkativeness of fools, the wisdom of fools,* and *old fools.* Further, after studying the definitions, students could make up a dialogue or story using the proverbs.

Then, if you have the 20 proverbs separately written on 20 cards or small pieces of paper, you can cut them in half and shuffle the 40 pieces in order to have students find the card that matches their half of the proverb. Thus you will make sure that students master the proverbs, and you will have selected pairs of students for any coming classwork in pairs. If you have a small class, 10 proverbs will work as well.

The secret to being a successful teacher seems to be unpredictability. When students do not know what you are going to do next, they are always alert. To keep their attention, it is good to crack jokes at serious lessons from time to time.

Your students might also enjoy a surprise lesson on proverbs.

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